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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the establishment of a mini-media center in all middle school English programs. A mini-media center is defined as a planned set of materials which involves students who fashion it as learners and as creators of materials and who serve as mediators between what has been learned and created and what other students may learn by using the completed center. Through direction sheets and kits, teacher guidance, and peer teaching, students learn to prepare visuals, charts, audio and video tapes, slides, games, books, movies, radio shows, and other materials. A mini-media center can be planned and created by one student or by a group of students who share an interest in similar content or in utilizing similar media. Several suggestions for creating and using a mini-media center are given, including possible topics for media study. (TS)

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Working with the early adolescent and with his/her thinking and language has always fascinated me. I suppose there are several reasons for this, some of which have to do with the transition from childhood to young adulthood and some with the shift from more nearly concrete to more nearly abstract referrents in language and thought which is typical of the age group. The sum of it all, however, is that I simply like them and enjoy being with them and helping them to extend their world and their language competence. Over the years I have learned that I stand a better chance of doing that when I use instructional approaches which involve them in thinking through for themselves what they have learned before and fitting it to a new and expanding personal framework, and in learning to use various materials and media to express themeselves. I've likewise learned that they can prepare original creations and instructional materials which are intended to be shared with or used by their peers, that they often like to do this, and that when they prepare materials for someone else's instructional benefit they themselves seem to profit most from it.

The idea for mini-media centers came into being about two years ago as I was casting about in my brain for a way to approach involving middle school students in their English classes as well

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as in peer instruction. The basic idea was born, trialed in several classrooms, and seemed to work, and thus I have chosen to describe such centers and share some ideas concerning them with you here today.

What is a mini-media center? The word "mini," m-i-n-i, explains itself, but to conceptualize a mini-media center we need to focus first on a form of the word media, mediate. To mediate is to serve as a vehicle for bringing about a result or conveying information to others. Either, or both of these, may be the reason for the creation of mini-media centers by and for middle school level students. The "result" which is brought about can be imaginative self expression for its own sake, or imaginative instructional materials the creator wishes to share with peers. To "mediate" in the sense of the mini-media center suggests working with various media for the purpose of expressing oneself in relation to something and/or for the purpose of conveying information to someone. Developing the idea further, media centers commonly include a collection of materials in various forms which are designed to instruct, stimulate thinking, or entertain. The composite is the definition of a mini-media center: a planned creation of a set of materials which involves the student who fashions it as a learner and as a creator of materials, as well as as a mediator between what has been learned and created and what other students may learn by using the completed center.

In the middle school English classroom, mini-media centers may be planned around and extend a theme in literature, or they may be planned around a problem which is interesting and requires solution, a convention in spoken or written language which one wants to "master," creative writing experiences, or other content. A student who plans and creates such a center typically will engage in thinking, reading, imaginatively interacting with the content which forms the basis of the center, selecting appropriate materials and media to use, deciding how to "treat" or represent each aspect of the content, and actually designing and preparing each individual portion of the center. A work area (a sort of a media center, in itself) is established in some part of the classroom or a close-by facility. Through direction sheets and kits, teacher guidance, and peer teaching, students learn to prepare visuals, charts, audio and video tapes, slides, games, hand-bound books, movies, radio shows, do-it-yourself kits, laminated surfaces, and other materials, and to utilize any or all of these effectively in expressing themselves and conveying the content they have decided will be a part of a center. A <u>completed</u> center, whether developed around a theme, a problem, skills to be learned, or other content, may include perhaps four to eight parts, each of which relates in some way with the others. The student or group of students who plan a center begin by deciding its purpose or purposes, the contents to be included and the way they will be most effectively mediated, and how they will structure the various

components into a unifying and satisfying "whole" and package them together into a center. Many need an adult for a "sounding board" as they plan. Feedback from peers is sufficient for others. Interaction among students as they plan a center, design and create its contents, and share it with still other students forms a basis for significant growth experiences.

As suggested earlier, a mini-media center may be planned and created by one student, or by a group of students who share an interest in similar content or in utilizing similar media. The contents of a center may grow out of and extend the ongoing English curriculum, or they may be a part of the restructuring and redefining of the English program: "which" will depend upon the interests, needs, and purposes of, and the nature of the demands made upon, the teacher and the students involved. I will come back in a few moments and share with you a brief description of the contents of several centers designed, prepared, and used by middle school students which related to an <u>ongoing</u> English program.

An important feature of work of this type is that it provides a <u>functional</u> situation for learning and teaching. Practice in communicating clearly and corrective editing become a natural part of the work on many of the centers. Several students last year developed, for instance, a center which they titled "Who Will Buy?" In it they used various types of oral and written

language, graphic art, and several other media to try to "sell" their classmates on reading books they themselves had found unusually good. As they completed and then listened to an audio recording of some of their advertisements their anticipation turned to disappointment. Comments such as "That don't sound like the guys on TV or radio" and "It sounds crummy" led to a group decision to start over and get some help on writing the script as well as on the recording procedure. When work involves content which interests the student, and when he/she knows the completed work will be shared with or used by peers, interest commonly increases in how things can be done and done well. Work on materials such as those designed to be included in a mini-media center lends itself to "right times" for learning and teaching certain skills.

The middle school English teacher who wishes to set up a media preparation area and make mini-media center preparation and use a part of the instructional program should begin by "taking stock" of the strengths and needs of his/her students and of the resources which are available and those which will have to be obtained. An awareness of the students who are to be involved will influence, even, how he/she will introduce them to the concept of the centers and to techniques related to the various media.It may be that the teacher will prefer to prepare in advance one or two such centers which are associated with a unit of work being undertaken, and let the students use them before introducing them to the idea of preparing their own. Like-

wise, he/she may find it desirable to teach a few selected students (not necessarily academic achievers) how to utilize certain media, and then let "each one teach one" how to use and maintain the materials and the preparation area. A careful planning of how one will begin will prove worthwhile in the long run. It should even turn up free and inexpensive materials, useable cast offs, and books and pamphlets which are available on uses of the various media, preparation of teaching materials, and efficient utilization of space and resources.

When students become involved in creating mini-media centers all of the parts of a given completed center can be housed in one box or envelope. The parts should be coded so that all, if they become seperated, can be reidentified easily. When a center is complete it can become a part of a growing library of such centers, and be checked out by other students and used as an introduction to or reinforcement of the content included, or as an enrichment experience.

A variety of centers has been developed in the last year or so since two middle school level teachers and I began to kick around the idea of making such centers and preparing students to make them. Skill oriented centers have been done on learning conventions of language usage. These have leaned heavily on audio recordings of background material and opportunity for oral practice, but have also included illustrative material on overhead transparencies, original film strips and games, and the use of puppets in "animated" puppet shows. A somewhat different

center to be developed was called "Literature Match," and in it a variety of techniques was employed to help the user associate certain literary selections and their authors during review work. An original game called "Dial an Author" appeared, an electrically wired question and response board and mats for it were prepared, excerpts from selections were placed on audio tape along with the names of the authors of the selections and short biographic sketches on them, two complete selections were taped and then illustrated with original slides, and a "You Were There" skit based on conditions in our country at the time several of the stories were written was created, practised, and video taped. Each of these was placed in a contact paper-covered shoe box which was appropriately labeled, a guide sheet for use of the center was prepared, and the center was ready for use.

What we came to call "Response" centers were among the favorite of those made and used. In these centers the focus was on the affective responses of both the center designers and the center users to a selected set of paperback books. Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry were included. The creators of the centers attempted to look at and synthesize their reactions to the books and to commit the results of their efforts to form and media so that their work could stimulate the thinking of others. Original poetry, essays, visual art, and music emerged. Debates were held and tape recorded. "Story starters" were included in some centers for the purpose of "baiting" potential readers. Sometimes entire chapters of books or short stories

were taped. "Hot Lines" for help on interpreting more difficult books and passages were operated as support systems during the times when center users were doing follow-through reading. In each case, the center user was encouraged to either develop an additional item to be added to the center he/she was using or to respond in some other way to having experienced the center. Over a period of time this resulted in sub sets of centers being formed, these essentially being new centers focusing on one aspect of the work in a previous center or on ideas generated during use of it. While the process did not go smoothly in every respect, and clashes sometimes occured over what were termed "misinterpretations of our center," this one type of mini-media center contributed much to stimulating real thinking and discussion among students and teachers involved.

"Do It Yourself" kits or centers were likewise popular. These focused on tasks to be accomplished or problems or puzzles to be solved by the user. Students who created such centers had to concentrate on finding good problems and puzzles, stating directions with clarity, deciding upon appropriate sequence, including necessary materials, and providing for help or extra clues for users who got "stuck." Users had to focus on following directions "to the letter," listening well when taped materials were included, and the processes they were using as they worked. Sometimes the contents were word problems

or puzzles; other times they were mysteries or involved three-dimensional objects. Several puzzles or problems which related made up one of the "Do It Yourself" centers or kits.

One of the teachers who has been involved in mini-media center work has prepared several centers herself on developing reading-study skills and is gradually working into having students help her prepare materials for some of these. Another is working with a small group of students on sentence combining and on teaching sentence combining to others through carefully designed mini-media centers. She has found that when a student understands the processes involved well enough to explain them successfully through examples to her and to apply them, he/she can help other students understand them. In the process, his or her own understanding deepens.

The work that has been involved in all of these and in other centers has involved middle school students in discovering and restructuring things already known and in forming new concepts based on direct experience as well as on increasingly abstract experience. It has helped them to expand their worlds while extending their language competence. It has involved them in learning to select and use a variety of media to express themselves, and in teaching, as well as learning from, their peers in a classroom setting. Mini-media centers are, simply, one

way of structuring work in the English classroom which fosters such involvement. Even when we deal with increasingly abstract content, in the final analysis we learn by "doing." The basic idea of the mini-media center may be useful to other middle school English teachers who, whatever the learning needs of their students, want to involve those students in learning by doing.